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## Post Postblack: Rethinking Contemporary Black Art in 2020 Art Culture

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Post Postblack: Rethinking  
Contemporary Black Art in 2020  
Art Culture

***Biography***

*Originally from Stockton, California, Brooke came to San José State University to be closer to the museums that shape Bay Area culture. She is fascinated by how much the critical role comes to play in the success of failures and artists. Her research is geared towards advocacy for diversity in art culture, namely in the direction of African American artists. Brooke’s long-term goal is to publish and curate exhibitions until she owns her own gallery. Additionally, Brooke wishes to be able to stand as a community pillar in advocating for marginalized artists. She desires for more students of color to see art and art history as a lucrative field of study. To her, choosing passion over profit is real success.*

## ***Post Postblack: Rethinking Contemporary Black Art in 2020 Art Culture***

### **Abstract**

For this study, I will be exploring the importance of advocacy in the art culture community. My research question is: Do we still need a postblack lens to look at black art and content? Historically, the black arts community's perspective following the civil rights era and leading to the rise of the Black Arts Movement had been left out of exhibition spaces. I intend to evaluate the impact of arts foundations and organizations that contributed to the success of artists and curators within New York City from the late 1960s onward. In the 21st century we have much more inclusive and integrated exhibitions, but how we measure this success is by assessing the influential and critical lenses of learning and teaching institutions in the community. A point of reference is the professional preference of institutions' decision-making staff; i.e. curators, development, the museum board, and the lack of cultural diversity on staff. The 1960s will be examined to frame the context of the exhibitions and artists discussed, as well as the vocabulary surrounding Black art and its integration into art culture. Key terms derived from the active organizations and individuals critiquing art culture during this time were "black aesthetic" and "post-blackness." Institutions or museums such as the Whitney Museum and the Metropolitan Museum will also be examined.

## Introduction

Art History is broken down by decades, movements, and influencers. This top down method covers bodies of work categorized under medium, theory, and concept. How the public responds critically of art in art culture tells present academics what was favored historically in the past. Art culture has become the means by which art is judged as a masterpiece through language and vocabulary to speak to the different forms and disciplines that art may take form in. Historically, that critical lens was an obstacle for many marginalized groups including women, low-income, and culturally diverse populations.

America in the 50s and 60s was a melting pot of natives, immigrants, and transient cultures that have settled and left the country over the years. It was also the time of the Civil Rights movements, soon to be a catalyst in the Black Arts Movement to come later. Academics working in art culture were fighting for equal opportunities for black artists in New York—starting with *Harlem on My Mind* at the New York Met, 1968-69, curated by Allon Schoener. Aruna D’Souza makes an interesting point about the irony of the exhibition title in Act 3 of her book; the irony of the wording: “Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America” hinges on the double meaning of *capital*—a term that not only refers to Harlem as a place, but also hints at the way in which blackness is traded as currency, a form of that other kind of capital. Schoener was attempting to recreate an exhibition model he used for *Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1870-1925*. The desire of the Harlem community was to be able to participate in an active role with this exhibition by opening at a famously private art club. Ultimately, they were denied. For a while, being able to see themselves represented within an institution of that caliber was a distant dream for any minority artist.

Academics and curators alike shed light on this injustice and subsequently, organizing groups began mobilizing to fight for space in art culture. Throughout history, race and class—classified as taboo subjects—remain issues as unconscious qualifiers in determining how successful a work may be in a set space from the 1960s onward. By the 1970s, after the Civil Rights Movement, curator and director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, Thelma Golden, coined the term “postblack” as a way of approaching black art by black artists that do not identify their work as

solely black. The desire to break away from the “black aesthetic” was to move away from tradition and culturally specific views surrounding black art. Today, intersectionality would be a perfect example of applying a wider set of variables for categorization to art so as to not limit it and reduce the work based on the artist’s identity. These terms only matter in the context of the critical view of artwork. To elaborate on this point, I consider the purpose of saying “black art” altogether. Art culture does not refer to art by Caucasian people as “white art,” although black art is and has been a qualifying term. As a result, within American art culture, race has been used as a way of referring to the complexity of a piece of art as a reflection of the artists’ practice of the medium and qualified skills.

One example of this is Jean Michel-Basquiat, a young artist popularized for his street graffiti in New York under the tag name SAMO in collaboration with Al Diaz. His work, when entered into the art market, was viewed as primitive by critics. In fact, some of the early considerations of black artists into mainstream art culture came from a white lens of viewing black art as less than or primitive and was often referred to as derivative of their white counterparts. Yet, over time, Basquiat’s race has not impacted sales of his work. The way he handled himself spoke above the racial boundaries Basquiat then used as a platform to elevate his career. The boom of his career also followed the contact he had with Warhol and gallery owners that represented young and up-and-coming artists with no professional training.

I recently visited the SF MoMA’s Andy Warhol retrospective, *From A to B and Back Again*, and cannot help but think of his essential role in the life and career of Jean-Michel Basquiat and his introduction to resources and consumer art culture that launched Basquiat’s career to the point of record. In 2017, Basquiat’s work was one of the highest selling pieces in Christie’s Auction House, sold for 110 million. Was it race, class, or gender that aided to this success? Alternatively, was it race, along with the opportunity and resources that he managed to string together through communities of artists, that allowed him to find success?

Organizers and financial backers to the artists and exhibitions that we regard today as turn of the century came from coalitions of people who desired an outcome for a specific group. There are four African American arts organizations that are responsible for the spread of black art in New

York and for the work done to start the careers of many artists looking for representation locally. The BECC and Harmon Foundation are two groups that have sought out opportunities to produce black work. The positives of representation were enticing to many artists, but the racial lens through which these exhibitions were viewed took away the opportunity for real criticism and for equal opportunity to be compared to another work by an artist from a separate racial group. This is where the postblack lens maintains “black art” under other terms of style, region, theory, and manifesto.

Our learning institutions or our places of organized art culture carry on the mainstream and avant-garde styles held by the community. The Metropolitan Museum exhibited *Harlem on My Mind* the same way The Whitney Museum of American Art exhibited *Black Male*. Both exhibitions told a perspective on black culture in a way that highlighted the complexities of representation while also challenging general notions of a demographic. However, the conversations go beyond the text in a catalogue. Exhibitions organized in response to the success and failures of these shows continued the ambition of artists and arts communities that sought integrated and complex exhibitions celebrating all artists and their mediums. This time period in art where museums were exploring race was unique to art culture and it inspired questions such as: Who is curating our art? Are they qualified? Do they have the vocabulary, and can they be better?

This research paper will be exploring New York from the 1960s and onward through history into contemporary art and asking if art culture needs to reevaluate black art through a postblack lens. The critical perspectives held on black art is important to understand and the initial opinions and retrospective thoughts on the work in their time period offer present ways of measuring the impact of these critics. Furthermore, the success of integrated artwork and improved representation of black artists attributed to the arts organizations responsible is something to investigate as well. As the measurable success of integration happened over the years, advocates asked for and created opportunities to show a complex catalogue of work form several mediums across the decades which led to socially complex and evolving work.

## Chapter 1: The BECC

The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) was an organized group focused on activism and actions toward agency to shape a better museum. Race and power within art institutions became the focus as the goal to reform how art institutions played a role in the art community was being investigated. This chapter focuses on two points: the Whitney Museum, between 1968 and 1971, and the historical and ideological base that contemporary art uses to discuss concerns of race and politics of the art community and market. The protests outside of museums in New York partly consisted of concerned artists and members of the communities that felt institutions were not playing their part in telling the accurate story of black and largely American art. Part of the strategy was to continue the conversation outside of the walls of galleries by organizing counter-exhibitions. These exhibitions would develop or highlight points made and asserted without depth or an objective perspective. To elaborate, when the established institutions were closing their doors to the black arts community, the community sought to highlight the failures of mainstream art culture by celebrating and exhibiting the successes of black artists within their spaces.

By 1971, there were over 150 members in the BECC. Some were key to the community, such as artists Benny Andrews and Brooklyn Museum's Community Gallery director, Henri Ghent. Affiliates of the Art Worker's Coalition (AWC), Harlem Cultural Council, and the Ad Hoc Women's Artists' Committee (Ad Hoc) played a role in the protests and formulation of exhibitions. Across the board, the main goal was not to connect art to a demographic or gallery, but to an ideological position. Black engagement was the key investment for many artists, most of whom had not been shown in New York galleries and museums before their membership to the BECC. This activism was motivated by a desire to be included and to receive their fair amount of criticism and publication of their work.

The first organized protest of the New York art institution began at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met). Under the curation of Allon Schoener, *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-68* was set to be a multimedia exhibition of the Harlem community and their contributions to art culture in a past to contemporary context. The model for this exhibition was taken from Schoener's former exhibition *The Lower*

*East Side: Portal to American Life (1870-1924)*. Comparatively, *the Lower East Side* was a historical narrative of a past immigrant community. *Harlem on My Mind* would challenge the format because of its extended reach into contemporary politics and race relations. The failure with this show was that there was no knowledgeable perspective being applied to a creative community and it also lacked self-representation. The BECC demanded that the Met, “appoint blacks to policy-making and curatorial positions” and “develop relationships with the black community.”<sup>1</sup> Although the Met initially appointed research communities connected to black art knowledge, there was no desire to and no actions done that would ensure a relationship down the road.

There is rare literature discussing the role of the BECC in detail, but Steven Dubin and Bridget Cooks are both art historians with perspectives on the organization and the exhibition *Harlem on My Mind*. What is most interesting, is the differing opinions on the goal and success of the exhibition. Dubin sees the Met as opening a conversation into the Harlem community and initiating a debate within art culture. Cooks takes the point of view that the exhibition took a stance to speak for and about the African American community—a point also supported by the BECC. The broader concern for Cooks and the BECC was that the internal museum representation by curatorial and administrative staff, and by extension, the exhibition of artwork, was an example of power and politics playing a role in a formal setting. Schoener referred to the protests and the racial and political tension as an “artistic event,” begging the question of whose work was on show and what was being displayed. Met director Thomas Hoving conceded, “I had seen the smoke and foolishly had ignored the signs of conflagration.”<sup>2</sup> The fact remained that the entire exhibition had been organized and curated by those who did not have intimate knowledge of Harlem or the arts community, and there was no desire to remedy the issue.

Coming after the Met was the Whitney’s exhibition, *The 1930’s: Painting and Sculpture in America*. Out of the 80 artists on view, none of

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace, Caroline V. “Exhibiting Authenticity: The Black Emergency Cultural Coalitions Protests of the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1968-71.” *Art Journal* 74, no. 2 (2015): 5–23.

<sup>2</sup> Wallace, *Exhibiting Authenticity*, 8-9



them were black.<sup>3</sup> A positive perspective taken by *New York Times* critic, Hilton Kramer, was that this exhibition was, “the first comprehensive attempt anyone has yet made to chart the course of American art in their period.” Kramer has also described this exhibition as the, “priority of aesthetic values over an art bound to political ideologies.”<sup>4</sup> This oversight was elaborated on by Ghent, who said, “The white establishment simply refuses to see us. The Whitney title is a misnomer. Black artists were very much a part of the America it refers to, yet they’re not represented here.”<sup>5</sup> This exhibition had excluded Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden whom had both been shown in this museum in 1930 and are regarded highly in past and present art culture.

The BECC picket slogan, November 17, 1968: “Ignored in the ‘30s, ignored in the ‘60s” was deafening and would add to the visibility of black artists. Following the objective to show black art independent of the formal art institutions of New York, the Studio Museum in Harlem organized a counter exhibition and, according to Faith Ringgold, artist and BECC member, the protest was to draw attention to the rebuttal exhibition *Invisible Americans: Black Art of the 30’s*.<sup>6</sup> Curated by Ghent, the group show represented 50 artists in a range of styles that the Whitney had covered in their “1930s” exhibition. The fact that there were 50 artists to include spoke to the oversight of the Whitney, but it was also an act of institutional critique. This debate between the two shows sparked discussions of race as a qualifier to be exhibited within a museum. The invitation to judge black art the same as white artists was a noble goal but being in a segregated gallery space sustained the looming reality that these artists were being judged according to the standards of white artists. Kramer took the stance of rejecting the success of the counter-exhibition since it was built upon race. Despite this, the exhibition remains valid as Jacob Lawrence, Hale Woodruff, and Joseph Delaney are all artists that the Whitney could have included and yet, chose to overlook.

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<sup>3</sup> Wallace, *Exhibiting Authenticity*, 10

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 10

The Whitney's stance to choose work based on "quality" is a loose defense of the selection process within the museum. John I. H. Baur, the director of the Whitney states, "It is not true that Agee didn't take Negro artists into consideration. He selected the art he felt was best for the exhibition, and the question of whether there were any Negro artists included never entered his mind."<sup>7</sup> This myopic perspective supported by the director of the Whitney points to the internal culture and whitewashing of art culture within the institution. Ghent addressed this issue by elaborating on the reality that black artists must physically separate themselves from their art in order to be shown in New York. The separation of their aesthetic qualities was not the point Ghent was trying to make, rather, "the ongoing use of imposed separation by art museums as a signifier of segregation concealed as reparation."<sup>8</sup> The BECC wanted agency for black artists and art experts within the establishment and not as a second rate category to be excluded. There is racism at the core of a museum where the structure does not include a diverse list of resources and contributions. The narrative that is being written shows how limiting a museum can be when one understands art and the legacy of it.

The BECC not only protested but exhibited works that challenged the structure and validity of the institutions in question. The Met and the Whitney both saw failures in their attempts to see the black arts community from their perspective. There was an effort to remedy the situation with the BECC coming to the Whitney with five major requirements that would ensure collaboration, fairness, and hopefully an end to this cultural myopia. In short, the first request was a black artist's show during the 1970-71 art season at the Whitney. Secondly, at least five one-man shows for black artists in the small gallery of the Whitney's lobby. Thirdly, more blacks in the Whitney Annual painting and sculpture shows, with black representation on their selection committees. Next, to purchase more black artists' work for the Whitney's permanent collection in addition to black representation on the purchase committee. And lastly, the BECC requested a black curatorial staff at the Whitney to oversee all implementations of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 13-14

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 14

these endeavors.<sup>9</sup> As expected, this did not fare well privately and publicly for institutions or community relations.

Following the BECC's involvement in protests, there was an increase in the permanent collection of the Whitney as they collected more black artwork. However, the dialogue became polarized as the demands for more diverse control over internal structures of the museum veered away from the agenda of the institution. Andrews looked at the gesture of an all-black exhibition as a way towards more integrated museums and a well-rounded narrative of American art culture. He further elaborated that there was a desire to not create two separate art worlds, but perhaps create a dialogue that integrates all artists that judges fairly and formally. No African American artists were given solo shows before the protest of November 17, 1968 and the subsequent discussions between the activists and the Whitney.<sup>10</sup> However, the small ground-floor gallery proved to be as beneficial as it was detrimental to the goal of the BECC.

Referred to as the “Nigger Room,” the coinage of that name came from the black artists who were being shown in this small area of the Whitney. This also kept the white or “high” art in the ascending floors above, separate, yet never regarded as equal in value. In October 1969, Baur announced the exhibition, *Contemporary Black Artists in America* while at the same time stating, “We’re taking these steps because we feel that black artists have suffered more handicaps than other artists—particularly in bringing their works to the attention of collectors and dealers.”<sup>11</sup> The issue with this statement is less in the reality that the art market has favored white artists; it is that there is no accountability or responsibility accepted by the Whitney and no direction as to whether it will change or improve. An art institution is a learning institution and should represent as much as possible to maintain this standard.

Andrews and Ghent were hopeful in their statements referring to the dialogue between the BECC and the Whitney. However, the appointment of Robert “Mac” Doty was not aiding in fulfilling any demands or easing

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 16

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 16

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 17

any racial tensions. The goal was to challenge the traditional structure of the decision-making staff. The hope was that the inclusion of a minority community member in the museum would bring about a change in perspective and eventually, production of exhibitions that would highlight broader topics and communities. By September 18, 1969, all dialogue broke down in a private legal document from the Whitney stating they could not appoint a guest black curator. In fact, they made it clear there that was no intention for the Black show, the Annuals, or any of their other activities. The Whitney would only consider *qualified* Black candidates for the curatorial position when a regular position would open. Furthermore, eligibility was based on the ability and experience of all candidates. Yet, in the end, the Whitney boasted about their collaboration and work done with the BECC in the making of this exhibition.<sup>12</sup>

The consultation that was handled by Doty was referred to as a difficult and pointless endeavor. There was no acknowledgement of the lack of qualification of Doty or the other curators to expand upon black art and this perpetuated more of the same issues the BECC fought to improve upon. There is a series of letters between Doty and Claude Booker, chairman of the Black Arts Council (BAC) in Los Angeles. To paraphrase, Doty informed Booker that he would fly to the West Coast for a week to review prepared photographs and presentations of work that should be nominated for the *Contemporary Black Artists in America* exhibition. There is no record of any consultations, conversations, or requests for help or information on any of the resources Doty received. Several pillars of the black art community denied ever hearing of or talking to Doty as he claimed he consulted on the composition of the artists that he would pick. This exhibition would not bring change but rather masquerade tradition as a symbolic function and maintain the status quo.<sup>13</sup>

The goal of the BECC and all supporters was to see permanent change, and to challenge tradition and structural racism that kept the ground-floor as the only space for a one-man black show. Agency was only found in the counter-exhibitions and the work done by the organization to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 20-21

bring visibility to the many artists that were a part of the activism. To have a say in the authority a museum has over art is a particularly powerful place to stand. The politics surrounding the role of curators and directors of museums stands in the history of any given institution. The fact remains, that without the organizing of artists, this problem would have continued, and the academic work done to cultivate the black New York artists would be lost to us. The Whitney and the Met do not see the same issues today as they did in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but the idea of viewing their displayed work objectively and with the same standard as all other artists is dire. The BECC publicized what contemporary racism was in institutions that have a long history of exclusion and prestige. To be included would not only mean to acknowledge the contributions of black artists, but to also make a point to build on a community that has been integral to America for over 400 years.

## **Chapter 2: The Measure of Collections and Critique**

African Americans face race most often as a barrier and this can result in social and economic barriers. Whether or not some of these barriers are controlled, the art culture community is operating in a measurable way that excludes several people. A new study led by three math and statistics experts and three art and art history experts of Williams College in Massachusetts and affiliated Universities, found that:

Forty thousand artworks in the collections of 18 museums across the U.S. estimate 85 percent of artists represented in these collections are white and 87 percent male compared to U.S. census data reporting 61 percent of the population to be white and 50.2 percent male.

Additionally, beyond race, women see success in the administrative roles within a museum, yet they still encounter barriers:

The leading museum in female representation is LA MOCA at 24 percent. Moreover, on average, there was less than 8 percent are represented in the other 15 museums in this study.

For the sake of recording the African American artistic population:

Just 2.4 percent of acquisitions and gifts over the past ten years to 30 U.S. museums were of work by African American artists. A high percentage of African American work to be in a collection stands at 10.6 percent at the High Museum. (Eileen Kinsella, news.artnet.com, February 2019)

The barriers at play when examining statistical data of the collection rate of artists according to race and gender do not reflect the number of artists and work in production. Assuming all art has its own merit, one thing that cannot be disputed is how art is approached through theory. There are two guiding methodologies Dr. Bridget R. Cooks references to illustrate American art culture. The first method, the anthropological approach—which perpetuates the superiority of mainstream White culture through its contrast to Black differences—is defined as inherently inferior. The second method, through corrective narrative, aims for the support and presentation of significant and overlooked work by African Americans to a mainstream audience.<sup>14</sup>

My concern is for the artists not being judged by merit and simply by categorized feelings towards work based on community and culture. Race, class, and training are often obstacles, but when work is boiled down to either anthropological study or aesthetic value, the work has immediately lost in the market. The fact of the matter is that exhibitions serve the public as a teacher of the values of art, culture, social movements, and national histories.<sup>15</sup> Valuing aesthetic also loses the political and cultural content that is often devalued by “high” brow art values.

There is a luxury and privilege having a voice in any private and public collection or institution of art. The high-class or high-brow culture that comes from handling fine work extends the signs of intellect and

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<sup>14</sup> Cooks, Bridget R.. *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003. Accessed December 9, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central., 1

<sup>15</sup> Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 3

complex thought within the work. Picasso was a marvel after bringing cubism forward as an art movement. His work was influenced by African masks and artwork; when describing early influences of young Jean Michel-Basquiat's work, Basquiat was inherently derivative. In fact, Basquiat was called the "black Picasso" in the rise of his career, despite the fact that Picasso's cultural connections came from Basquiat's culture and heritage. The "primitive" qualities of black-produced art had devalued the work and has made anything resembling traditional mediums and compositions seen as derivative. For a time, mobility across production of art was not possible; Cooks asserts that the exclusion of African Americans comes from, "The exhibition of artworks by African Americans in art museums transgress[es] traditionally accepted forms of power, aesthetics, and social order, not due to any features of the works of art, but because the definitions of what is 'beautiful, natural and legitimate.'" <sup>16</sup> Legitimizing the work of black artists would allow for the integration of their work into museums, collections, and exhibitions on the same platform.

The organizations that have come into place in these underserved minority communities is why community involvement is so important to cultural and social growth. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in American, and Commission on Race Relations saw and mobilized on energy from "...art exhibitions as useful ways to demonstrate Negro value and artistic contribution to the nation that interest in showing work by Negroes became part of a program from social change."<sup>17</sup> In order to stimulate the community, there needed to be other programs in place for intellectual and creative experiments, and work to be cultivated and displayed. One of the early examples of an active role in community stimulus comes from the Harmon Foundation founded under William E. Harmon, a real estate mogul who invested in Negro creativity by establishing the Harmon Foundation in 1922.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 11

The foundation's goal was "to recognize and promote the overlooked achievements of African Americans and respond to the increase of racial tension in America." Providing for the Negroes, the blind, cartoonists, model farmers, and Africans—the foundation, "not only to encourage the Negro in creative expression of a high order, but to assist him [*sic*] to a more sound and satisfactory economic position in the field of art."<sup>19</sup> Black arts organizations are important in the representation of black culture in the art world, specifically commercial and private art collections. As previously discussed in the context of the BECC, the advocating for equal opportunity to be exhibited and critiqued would only broaden as well as deepen American art culture. The accessibility of art culture is built upon the system that upholds it, and in the late 1960s art was an established white-favored structure.

### **Research Questions**

**In the age of the black aesthetic, do the contributions of black arts organizations factor into the current narratives of black contemporary art?**

The fact is that times have changed. It is loosely discussed that at the height of Basquiat's career, the black aesthetic and postblack way of thinking saw a shift into contemporary art. Artists such as Kehinde Wiley are not concerned about American race issues, but rather American-European standards and how a young black man's insertion can change a painting style. We now have the Ford Foundation and the Mellon Foundation as two institutions dedicated to cultivating diversity and awarding grants and other opportunities. In present day, race is not the same issue it was fifty years ago; the communities in places like Oakland, California and Brooklyn New York have maintained collectives on a smaller scale. The resources are available both locally and internationally by art supporters.

**What is the responsibly written narrative of African American Contemporary art?**

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 19



*Harlem on My Mind* missed the mark by not consulting with experts of black art. Schoener could say that had he been given books or had the inclination to do independent study before the conception of this exhibition, he might have found artists that had been overlooked. It is also fair to say that recycling exhibiting formats is not easy with two different timeline and historical contexts. Taking time to research artists, community history, and broadening the scope of artists under investigation are all steps to ensure that all information possible is included and given concisely to the public. One does not have to rely on a black individual to speak for or about black art but having bearings in the field and critiquing the work fairly is a start to how art history can remain ethical and inclusive.

### **Do racial barriers still exist in the same way the late '60s and '70s sparked the black arts movement and organized artists' groups?**

The barriers experienced today come from the lack of collection of black artworks largely across the board. Long standing institutions have made attempts to remedy this issue; some have struggled to exhibit black art alongside work that is already a part of the institution. Universities like HBCUs have been cultivating collections for years and have found great success in acquiring more. Furthermore, artists who have now auctioned work in the millions were first collected by smaller institutions, including galleries. There have not been exhibitions ignoring the issue of race or blatantly misrepresenting a community. In large part, the artists, critics, and institutions that have made the change to include more and to diversify have made the difference. Despite this, the museum staff are still favoring white women. This point is not being concluded on the qualifications, but rather the inclusion of diverse backgrounds that speak for museums. Latinx and black communities lose out on achieving the curatorial positions, especially if they are overqualified for the position a museum is offering.

### **Conclusion**

Linda Nochlin had a striking question on why there are no great female artists in the conversation of great American artwork. Frankly, this question is even more significant for black women artists because they live with gender and racial discrimination in a multitude of ways.

Simone Leigh was in the Whitney for the biennial and the Guggenheim in a solo exhibition. Basquiat also had a solo Guggenheim show curated by Chaédria LaBouvier, a guest curator. There is a current trend of African American artists focusing on identity politics that took New York in the summer of 2019 by storm. These solo exhibitions are what give viewers an immersive and informative experience with an artist's body of work.

The fact remains that there is no shortage of black artists, although black curators, solo exhibitions, and publications are sometimes difficult to come by. Circulation and excitement about new or different work can be the difference between tremendous success or a plateau in an artist's career. Funding is a huge influencer in how patrons see the work in museums, as well as the opinions of critics of periodicals and other publishing formats. The buzz around the work of an artist or show can ultimately determine that artist's success. However, there is also a museum's responsibility to collect the artist's work to keep the history of culture and communities active. The Baltimore Museum of Art made the proclamation that they are only collecting female art in the year 2020. Such announcements should not make headlines; all museums should take an initiative to incorporate more perspectives and diverse backgrounds into their collections. As a result, the Baltimore museum will now impact their art community by bringing in new work by artists who are not well-known in the city. What would happen if a few museums made a similar announcement that half—if not all—of what they will collect in 2020 would be black works? Artists like Betye Saar, Kara Walker, Barkley Hendricks, and Gordon Parks could become household names like Warhol or Hockney.

In my personal experience, a few marginalized communities have come up in art survey courses, but they were additions from the professors into the lecture slides or would receive a paragraph and maybe a picture visual on a single page in a textbook. Nevertheless, they came as an afterthought or as a “meanwhile” to break up the contributions of white male artists and their artistic and experimental processes. There was no mention of the Diaspora and its translation into the Harlem Renaissance and black expressionism; that history only came through in an independent study of black contemporary art. Black contemporary art, in the way I understand it, began with organizations like AfriCOBRA, BECC, the

Harmon Foundation, and the YMCA when New York museums exhibited black history more than the artwork black individuals created. The formation of these artist-run communities was the reason why many of these artists received the funding to circulate their work in community exhibitions.

The institutions, collectives, and exhibitions focused on the cultivation of black artistic expression played a vital role in the success of black artists today. I can say that the theory and sources to investigate the success of black artists has not been easily accessible. Between academic journals, small-batch publications, and word of mouth from professors, the works of black artists completed early in our contemporary history to the present are severely under-researched. For this reason, my research is about accessibility, documentation, and visibility to increase the awareness of black art and artists and to bring them into the conversations we have about the modern aesthetic championed by the New York or San Francisco MoMAs. There is a larger question of why so many great artists have not seen their retrospective or group show with related artists. By researching and writing about their respective bodies of work, I intend to understand the current standards their work is placed under in the present day.

Critiquing the education I received is one thing, but the lack of accessibility to a variety of academic voices is the basis for wanting to push for more diversity and breadth in the investigation of movements and turning points in art history. However, it is not just black artists; it is artists who are female, underprivileged, self-taught, and the ones who are still trying to emerge and make a name amongst the masses of artists that are popping up every day. It is the spaces and gatekeepers that prevent many from accessing this education. The price of admission and lack of general knowledge of a museum are enough to cause a low-income minority student hesitation to visit one unless given the opportunity on a school trip.

The gatekeeper of what becomes exhibited is easy to simplify to a race, class, or gender bias but it does not tell readers much about what makes for good or profitable art. A museum or art institution's system is the viewer, the artist, and the institution. It is their role to represent the artist and bring art into that given community through research, publications, and a catalog to help circulate that wealth of knowledge. To have more minorities represented in the decision-making process of a museum's

exhibition could impact what gets shown in an institution and how the narrative is written to explain the work. Controversial appointments into these higher status roles is a current argument with the Brooklyn Museum's hiring of a white woman for their African Arts collection. Not to say that she is unqualified, but there is something about the black experience and expression that can only be understood by people with first-hand experience. The Diaspora is unique to black peoples the same way the suffragette movement was for women as opposed to men. The equality and representation in content and artistic spaces is disproportionate to the people who are in the field. There is no a shortage of black curators, development staff, membership, etc., yet they are not the ones being hired or applying in general.

Pursuing a graduate degree in art history and focusing on and exploring the different facets of African American contemporary art is necessary to the academic world. The work of African American artists spans over decades of work, both documented and lost to us, and it is important to our country's history. History and heritage shape the culture and identity that so many people go through or perhaps have never considered. The contributions of black Americans are often forgotten or unknown. So, working to examine some aspects of history that tell their story is important to everyone to understand the cultural contributions of a large population.

In Montgomery Alabama, the National Memorial of Peace and Justice is taking the time to tell a history, not pleasant to the ears, but to the history of the United States. By creating a vision through design, the lynching of African Americans that took place in America is discussed and documented under this sociological project. Memorialized through the etched names of the known victims, this place of reflection and memory is creating a space to meditate on the severity of the racial tensions and trauma in America from over 400 years ago. In 2018, during the unveiling of the exhibition in a city where the civil rights movements had taken place, it enriched the town with knowledge and history. Ultimately, this is the whole point of these institutions—to tell stories from the source of the people who experienced them. Whether it is female, Asian, Indian, Pakistani, or Canadian, these voices should be recognized and talked about with reverence and a tone suited for accurate portrayal.

To question the role of the curator, artist, and viewer is to question the source of the content and the curatorial phrasing that is presented to viewers through text panels and exhibition catalogues. Furthermore, how impactful is it for the artist to have their work shown in an exhibition space? Black art organizations utilized exhibitions as a platform to showcase the diverse craft and skill of several communities. Art culture emerging in the next few years might see a shift as we move from Harlem, to civil rights, to post-blackness, to our contemporary examples of today's social spaces. Art is made to be shared and shown as educational tools into a person's psyche and, hopefully, a glimpse into a collective body of experiences and global understanding. I wonder if art culture will eventually—in the ways of curatorial work, publications, and personal/institutional collections—reflect the melting pot that America built.

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